**Weather Symbolism in *A Farewell to Arms***

**Snow**

In *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway attempts to tell the unvarnished truth about war — to present an honest, rather than a heroic, account of combat, retreat, and the ways in which soldiers fill their time when they are not fighting. Yet Hemingway's realistic approach to his subject does not rule out the use of many time-honored literary devices.

For instance, weather is to this day a fundamental component of the war experience. Hemingway depicts weather realistically in *A* *Farewell to Arms*, but he uses it for symbolic purposes as well. Rain, often equated with life and growth, stands for death in this novel, and snow symbolizes hope: an entirely original schema.

In stories such as "To Build a Fire," by Jack London, snow and ice quite logically represent danger and death. After all, one can freeze to death, fall through thin ice and drown, or perish beneath an avalanche. In Chapter II of *A Farewell Arms*, on the other hand, it is snow that ends the fighting described in the book's first chapter. Thus snow stands for safety rather than its opposite. (Note, though, that although snow covers the bare ground and even the Italian army's artillery in Chapter II, stumps of oak trees torn up by the summer's fighting continue to protrude — a reminder that winter is of course not permanent but merely a reprieve from combat, a cease-fire.) Shortly thereafter, Frederic Henry describes the priest's home region of Abruzzi as a "place where the roads were frozen and hard as iron, where it was clear and cold and dry and the snow was dry and powdery . . . ," and the context leaves no doubt that this characterization is a positive one.

Late in the novel, the argument between the Swiss policemen over winter sports not only provides much-needed comic relief; it also marks the beginning of Henry and Catherine Barkley's second idyll. (The first takes place in summertime, in Milan.) Immediately afterwards, Henry and Catherine find themselves in the Swiss Alps, with snow all around. Thus they have temporarily achieved a life of both purity (the mountains symbolize purity in this novel, versus the corruption of the lowlands) and safety. These chapters positively radiate contentment.

**Rain**

Starting in the very first chapter of *A Farewell to Arms*, rain clearly symbolizes death: "In the fall when the rains came the leaves all fell from the chestnut trees and the branches were bare and the trunks black with rain," Henry tells us. "The vineyards were thin and bare-branched too and all the country wet and brown and dead with autumn." The rain symbolism is not entirely a literary conceit, either, as rain actually precedes an outbreak of fatal illness, the cholera that kills seven thousand that fall.

Later, during their Milan idyll, Catherine makes the symbolism of the rain explicit for Henry — and for the reader: "I'm afraid of the rain because sometimes I see myself dead in it," she says to him. "And sometimes I see you dead in it." Lo and behold, during Henry and Catherine's trip from the armorer's to the hotel near the train station on his last night with her, the fog that has covered the city from the start of the chapter turns to rain. It continues to rain as they bid one another farewell; in fact, Catherine's last act in this part of the novel is to signal to Henry that he should step in out of the rain. Back at the front, "the trees were all bare and the roads were muddy."

It rains almost continuously during the chapter when the tide of battle turns and the Italians begin their retreat from Caporetto — and from the Germans who have joined the fighting. The rain turns to snow one evening, holding out hope that the offensive will cease, but the snow quickly melts and the rain resumes. During a discussion among the drivers about the wine they are drinking with dinner, the driver named Aymo says, "To-morrow maybe we drink rainwater." Hemingway by this time has developed the rain symbolism to such a degree that the reader experiences a genuine sense of foreboding — and indeed, the following day will bring death to Henry's disintegrating unit.

It is raining while the fugitive Henry rides the train to Stresa, raining when he arrives, and raining while Henry and Catherine spend the night together in his hotel room. The open-boat trip across Lake Maggiore takes place in the rain, with an umbrella used as a sail. (Ominously, the umbrella breaks.) And in Chapter XL, as Henry and Catherine are bidding farewell to their wintertime mountain retreat for the city in which Catherine's baby is to be born, Henry tells us that "In the night it started raining."

Finally, when Henry leaves the hospital for lunch during Catherine's protracted, agonizing delivery, "The day was cloudy but the sun was trying to come through" — a literal ray of hope. During the operation, however, he looks out the window and sees that it is raining. Just after the nurse has told him that the baby is dead, Henry looks outside again and "could see nothing but the dark and the rain falling across the light from the window." At the novel's end, Henry leaves the hospital and walks back to his hotel in the rain. In fact, the final word in *A Farewell to Arms* is "rain," evidence of weather's important place in the story overall.

Hemingway doesn't quite trust us to detect the rain/snow pattern of symbolism and understand its meaning; therefore he underlines the significance of precipitation in his book by having Catherine tell Henry that she sees them dead in the rain. And so the weather symbolism in *A Farewell to Arms* is perhaps unnecessarily obvious. Yet Hemingway's use of this literary device is hardly rote symbolism for its own sake. Rain and snow both drive his plot and maintain our interest, as we hold our breaths every time it rains in the novel, praying that Catherine will not perish during that scene. (We know that Henry will survive the rain, because he is the story's narrator.) Thus, while writing a brutally realistic saga of life during wartime, Ernest Hemingway also crafted a novel as literary as the great-war stories that preceded *A Farewell to Arms*. Arguably it is as powerful as any story ever told.